

Miss Universe

Making Top 16 a dream come true

Miss Universe Singapore Nandita Banna is at peace with the outcome of the pageant

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Shock and disbelief coursed through Miss Universe Singapore Nandita Banna when she made history by placing in the Top 16 of the beauty pageant.

When the show's host Steve Harvey announced her name at the pageant in Eilat, Israel, on Monday, she was stunned – Singapore had not made it to the semi-finals in 34 years.

The 21-year-old undergraduate told The Straits Times in an e-mail interview: "Shock and disbelief turned into happiness and joy when it started sinking in – that's the first cut, the first dream.

"And to me, even though I wanted it so badly, it felt like an unrealistic dream because there were so many powerhouse countries which also wanted to get into the Top 16, like the Philippines, Venezuela and Thailand.

"I was also not expecting it because Singapore hadn't made it to the semi-finals in 34 years and Singaporeans usually think that we have no chance. But I was glad to prove everyone wrong."

The Top 16 reveal was followed by the swimsuit competition, but Miss Nandita reached the end of her Miss Universe road when she did not crack the next round – the Top 10.

Miss India Harnaaz Sandhu was eventually crowned the winner, as several contestants defied pres-



India's Harnaaz Sandhu was crowned Miss Universe on Monday. PHOTO: REUTERS

sure to boycott the 70th edition of the annual pageant – held in Israel for the first time – in support of the Palestinians.

Miss South Africa Lalela Mswane took the second runner-up spot, even though South Africa's Ministry of Sports, Culture and Arts had urged her to stay away.

Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia, nations that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, did not send contestants, though both cited complications related to the pandemic, not Israel's human rights record.

Miss Nandita, who will be arriving home tomorrow, said she is at peace with the outcome of the pageant.

"People expected me to feel sad and disappointed, but I feel content and happy because I did what I came here to do.

"I came to Miss Universe thinking, 'I want to make Singapore



Miss Universe Singapore Nandita Banna in a red and white national costume designed by home-grown couturier Frederick Lee. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

proud, I want to make history for Singapore, I want to be that change-maker'. And I was just happy that the judges saw my potential and put me in the Top 16, and now I have this whole journey ahead of me where I can improve and grow."

An alumna of Raffles Girls' School and Raffles Institution, she is a third-year double-degree student at the Singapore Management University, majoring in business management and information systems (business analytics).

Looking back, she felt her performances on stage and in the question-and-answer segment in the preliminary rounds helped boost her chances and were the key to her success.

Her modelling and runway experience helped her walk and present herself better.

"I also think that because I am a dancer and I love being on stage,

my confidence and energy were present. I had fun, I wasn't stressed out. I was just enjoying myself, showcasing and entertaining the audience."

She also considers herself a good speaker who knows how to articulate her thoughts well.

For example, she felt she nailed her preliminary interview, whether the judges were asking her about being one of the few candidates with short hair, the origins of the capelet she was wearing or what it was like pursuing a double degree in a male-dominated field.

Summing up her Miss Universe experience, Ms Nandita said she relished the chance to "show the world that Singaporeans are not just brainy people, Stem (science, technology, engineering and mathematics)- or work-oriented".

"We can do multiple things, we can be holistic. We can win beauty pageants, we can do double de-

grees. We can excel in whatever we set our minds to and we shouldn't be held back because we are a small country and we don't think we have a chance."

Her family said the Top 16 feat was a moment they will cherish forever.

Her father G. Rao Banna, 52, is a senior manager at Republic Polytechnic; her mother Madhuri, 53, works in building information modelling; and her brother Saurav, 16, is an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia in Canada.

Her parents, who moved to Singapore from India before Miss Nandita was born, said in a joint statement: "Personally, we feel that God has given us a chance in this form to give back to Singapore, which we have called our home for the last 25 years."

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